

Outpatient Commitment Works

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This is the seventeenth article from the Supreme Court of Ohio Advisory Committee on Mentally Ill in the Courts about effectively dealing with offenders with mental illness. Most families struggling with the effects of mental illness struggle alone. The author of this article prefers to remain anonymous, but wants to share her story to give others hope that there are effective ways to deal with mental illness. She and her husband found the help they needed through the operation of the civil commitment process of one of Ohio's probate courts.

Civil commitment is a civil legal process whereby a probate court orders a person into involuntary mental health treatment upon a determination that the person is mentally ill and in need of treatment. The civil commitment process is utilized most often when a person is unable, because of their mental illness, to meet their mental health treatment needs. In Butler County, unlike most other counties, a person's civil commitment case remains pending until that person stabilizes on their mental health treatment plan.

My husband John has a mental illness. Because of his illness he did things that threatened our marriage. With help from the court system John's illness is now being treated and our marriage has been saved.

When I first met John he was just what I was looking for—a smart, good-looking, funny guy. After dating a few months we decided to get married. Shortly before our wedding John and I had our first big argument. He became very angry and destroyed several things in my apartment.

Our wedding ceremony took place in a cute little chapel in Nevada. We were very happy as we left the chapel to begin our honeymoon at beautiful Lake Tahoe. But on a sightseeing cruise I accidentally taped over a portion of our wedding video and John exploded again, this time destroying the video tape and other mementos from our wedding ceremony. Our flight home was unbearable.

When we returned home, things went from bad to worse. John did strange things such as unplugging the household appliances for no reason. He talked about the government and people who he thought were trying to kill him. He could not hold down a job. Sometimes I made him leave our apartment, but I always took him back. He had no one else to help him, and I really did love him.

One night he came home after I had gone to bed and I woke to find him standing in the doorway with a knife. When I asked him what he was doing, he looked at the knife in his hand and slowly walked back to the kitchen to put it away. That night he seemed to be in a trance and I was certain that he was unaware of what he was doing.

Knowing my husband needed help, I called mental health agencies. I learned that he could be committed at a hospital if I could get him there, but without a court order they would only be able to hold him for 72 hours. I talked him into going to the hospital to have a cyst treated, and while there I confided to the nurse that I thought John was mentally ill.

After speaking with John for only a few minutes, an emergency room doctor ordered that John be admitted to the hospital's psychiatric ward. John exploded again and had to be restrained by several members of the hospital staff, and injected with a sedative. It was the worst night of my life.

Three days later under proper medication, John was discharged from the hospital. As long as John took the medication he continued to improve, but everything changed when John decided he was well and no longer needed medication. His strange behavior began to return.

We were expecting our first child and I began to worry what might happen if John had another outburst of anger. At my request, John left. A week later he returned, with no money, no plans, and no hope. I was worried what might happen to him, so I took him back again.

John continued to decompensate. I tried to get help for him, but he would not talk and would not open the door to speak to the mental health workers I summoned. One night, when I was six months pregnant, he became extremely upset and pushed me across the room. I called the mental health workers and they came with a police officer and took him back to the hospital. This time I filed an affidavit with the Probate Court and a hearing was held before a judge.

The judge committed John to a state mental hospital for three months. Because John wanted to see me and be a father to our child, John agreed to follow the doctors' directions. When he was released from the hospital he returned home a changed man. We were happy again.

After John's release from the hospital, the judge continued John's commitment to see how he would respond to outpatient treatment. He had John come to the court for monthly reviews. During the reviews the judge talked to John and encouraged him to continue taking his medication. When John was first released from the hospital, he only took his medication because the judge wanted him to, and because John did not want to go back to the hospital. After several months John began to gain real insight into the nature of his illness, and finally began to understand the value of the medication and how effectively it could work in treating his kind of illness.

Today, John is thriving. We now have two children and John is a wonderful husband and devoted stay-at-home father. Without the help of devoted mental health professionals and a very empathetic judge we would not be where we are today. John and I are grateful for the civil commitment laws and for the

outpatient commitment process. We learned that there are times when court involvement is necessary. John still has a mental illness and none of us know what the future may hold. But we know that if we need it, there is a system in place that combines the treatment available from mental health professionals with the authority and concern of a court, and we know that system works.

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